



Near-death Experiences: Narratives in an Extraordinary Setting

Eriona Kita-Vyshka¹, Gentian Vyshka^{2,*}

¹Albanian National Film Archive, Tirana, Albania. Doctoral Student, University of Tirana

²Faculty of Medicine, University of Medicine in Tirana, Albania

*Corresponding author (Email: gvyshka@gmail.com)

Abstract - Near-death experiences have been described with a variety of forms and narratives. Different medical conditions leading to loss of consciousness or causing a restriction in the perceptive field have been related with the appearance of near-death experiences. A few literary narratives of these experiences are available, with fictional characters exposed to helplessness and despair during the impending death. A situation of near-death experience is described in the last part of the seventh chapter of an Albanian novel 'The castle' of Ismail Kadare. The last two pages of this chapter describe the confusion following the crash of a tunnel dug deep underground from Turkish soldiers, which aimed to reach inside a besieged castle. Darkness-related hallucinations and restriction of cognitive field due to environmental factors will be responsible of the aftermath following the deliberate crash of the tunnel, caused from the castle inhabitants, after fierce fighting during the siege. A fictional description of these experiences and of the psychological and physical agony will complete the rest. Near-death moments and respective descriptions have been an important field of medicine, humanities and forensic sciences. Only some writers have hazarded into describing such personal experiences of despair and helplessness during the agony and impending death.

Keywords - Near-Death Experience, Impending Death, Despair, Agony, Narratives

1. Introduction

Death, dying and impending demise are frequent themes of theology, religion, philosophy and psychology. Coping mechanisms with apparently an irreversible and inescapable destiny have been formulated in the stages of grief (Kübler-Ross, 1969). However, transitional states of agony, last seconds of life experiences, and perceptual sketches of subjective impressions related herein are far from being standardized or uniformly scrutinized and described. Thus, providing a theoretical basis for the experiences related to last moments of life, especially from a neuro-psychological perspective, might seem difficult.

Rather than being scared, humans have shown particular interest to experiences of survivors from agony and cardiac arrest, and have been fascinated from narratives of such experiences. Near-death experiences [NDE] are not a recent theme, since many ancient authors have hazarded to describe situations apparently close to an irreversible event like the death. Mainly considered as 'visions', NDE described in the ancient authors [Plato, Plutarch] are an overt statement of the duality soul-body, since the soul leaves the body, and eventually turns back to the survivor (Van der Sluijs, 2009). Under this point of view, even visits to the underworld, like Odysseus visiting Hades, and conversations with dead relatives [Odysseus talking to his mother], will become a

probable portion of the vast perimeter of experiences encircling NDE (Homer, 1946).

Before listing the variety of NDE we need to provide, apart from a definition, even a neurological substrate to the issue. A 'near-death experience' is referred to an alteration of consciousness during a life-threatening condition (Greyson, 1980). Survivors of cardiac arrest have been amidst the first to communicate their experiences, and with the advances in medical technology, the number of people going close to death, but then resuscitated, will obviously increase (French, 2005).

The first systematic collection and analysis of NDE started with Raymond Moody in 1975 (Moody, 1975). Probably, like in many other cases, Moody was not the first to start a modern scientific evaluation of the phenomenon, since Heim, a Swiss geologist, collected such impressions in 1891 from his colleagues having suffered falls during climbing in the Alps (Heim, 1891). Greyson coined an *ad hoc* scale for the NDE experiences; and his is as well the very important idea that the study of this phenomenon might yield clinically important techniques vis-à-vis suicide prevention and treatment of bereavement (Greyson, 1983a; Greyson, 1983b).

Apart from all this consistent bulk of research and interest, sources still accept the fact that NDE is empirically untestable (Van Tellingen, 2008). This is a consistent challenge toward defining responsible mechanisms, yet not an insurmountable one.

2. Phenomenology

Some authors try to find a distinction between NDE and out-of-body experiences, albeit both are considered as perceptual remnants of consciousness beyond physical death (Rousseau, 2011b). As said before, an alteration of consciousness seems intrinsic for NDE to appear, however, some authors consider NDE as a lucid event in the whole history of agony, coma and eventually, resuscitation (Bonilla, 2011).

Generally, NDE are reported as pleasant phenomena, with out-of-body experiencing of different situations, such as hearing conversations, entering a tunnel-like, perception of light, leaving the body behind, meeting and speaking to dead loved ones, returning to life after visit to heaven, entering a realm garden, as well as experiencing a life review, or perception of sounds and music (Kaplan & Sadock, 2007; Agrillo, 2011). Survivors generally refer these experiences as peaceful and loving, and are able to distinguish it from dreams or hallucinations.

Dichotomizing the issue into 'mind' and 'body', otherwise said in medical terms as psychological and somatic components, is a Cartesian imposture that can be an oversimplified one (Jaye, 2004). Instead differentiating the 'self', the 'body', the 'mind' and the 'spirit' will be a more detailed and logical approach, even for NDE (Jaye, 2004). In all cases, the fluid borders separating these notions self – body – mind – spirit, embodied as they are in an intact soma and conscience, will become enormously distanced from each other during NDE. Theological and religious influences hereby are strong enough to penetrate even into treatises of psychiatry: Kaplan and Sadock suggest such an experience to be compatible with *unio mystica*, an oceanic feeling of mystic unity with an infinite power (Kaplan & Sadock, 2007). In fact, if the perceptions of heaven or hell, the encountering of deceased persons or religious figures, as well as belief in God, are all part of NDE, than even Biblical episodes will not be deprived from the phenomenology. Narratives of Enoch with his vision of God (the patriarch Enoch did not die from a natural death) might be considered near-death experiences, with all their mystical and pious components (Genesis, 1984; Sch äfer, 2011).

3. The Plot

Narratives of near-death experience or impending death in terms of helplessness and despair are literary available as well. A clear situation of near-death experience or impending demise is described in the last part of the seventh chapter of the well known Albanian novel 'The castle', of Kadare. The last two pages of this chapter describe the confusion – in mental terms – following a crash inside the tunnel the soldier dug deep underground, aiming to reach inside the castle they attempted to occupy.

The novel 'The castle' was first published in Albanian from the writer Ismail Kadare on 1970; very soon two

translations followed, with the French version "La citadelle" that was changed to "Les tambours de la pluie", and with the English version "The siege" (Kadare, 1994; Kadare, 2008). French and English versions have been published several times; initially from Albanian state editing houses, thereafter in France and other western countries. In the present paper all quotes and fragments are taken from the first English version published in Tirana forty years from now, with a translation from the original Albanian into English by Pavli Qesku (Kadare, 1974).

The French version, so far the most sold outside Albania, relies on a metaphor right from the altered title: 'Les tambours de la pluie', i.e. 'The drums of the rain'. If English titles are mutually exchangeable, since *Castle*, *Citadelle* and *Siege* mean thereafter, the bloody and painful process of besieging a castle in order to occupy it and to slaughter the defenders, the French version prints out the synthesis of the siege. In fact, the siege of the castle will end up in a humiliating way for the assaulters, soon after the first autumn's rains. The drums of the rain that the Ottoman army uses to announce the end of a dry summer, during which the unrelenting siege went on with assaults and shelling and fighting, means as well that the army was supposed to leave the premises immediately, and turn back home. This is the end of the story, which starts up with the siege, during which the Ottoman Turks succeeded in cutting the water supply to the castle, thus increasing the hope for a capitulation. The water of autumn's rains will prevent castle-holders of dying from thirst, and will make the siege meaningless thereafter.

The novel deals with the gloomy history of an Albanian castle of the fourteenth century, which was attacked from Ottoman Turks during their advancing in the Balkans. Besieging a castle was a normal way of war at that period of time, since 'castle' was synonym of the city to be invaded. After that the Ottoman army failed to occupy the castle through assaulting it openly, the foreign invaders decided in secret to change tactics. Soldiers started digging up a subterranean passage under the walls of the castle, in order to gain access to it through the underground.

The writer's fantasy and narratives will dedicate almost an entire chapter, the seventh of the novel, with a detailed description lasting almost eight pages, to the horrible fate of the soldiers trapped inside this tunnel [pages 130-137 of the English version of the novel] (Kadare, 1974). In fact, the defenders of the castle understood the assaulters' plan, and deliberately crashed the tunnel through a controlled explosion of a barrel of powder. Stocked in inside the tunnel, dozens of Ottoman Turks soldiers will die up slowly, with no way out. The writer produces hereby a very interesting narrative from his fictional characters, which were subdued to their slow, horrible and inescapable lethal fate.

4. Narratives

Inside the tunnel, with no way out, the fictional characters enter their agonizing moment gradually, but in a progressive

and irreversible way. Despair and helplessness are the main characteristics of the discourse; darkness-related hallucinations and restriction of cognitive field due to environmental factors are all of them responsible of the aftermath following the deliberate crash of the tunnel, caused from the castle inhabitants after fierce fighting during the siege.

The astrologue of the army, now degraded and punished from the Turkish Pasha [the commander-in-chief] to become part of the grizzly underground regiment, is the main fictional character. He starts listening voices [probably realistic] from other soldiers entrapped like him inside the tunnel, and the substance of the conversations, or monologues, quickly goes into two directions.

Initially the unlucky soldiers pass through stages of grief with an impressive velocity; however we should consider that the agony might have been much longer than the one literary described from the writer, thus fantasised, in the last three-four pages of the seventh chapter of the novel (Kadare, 1974). Denial and bargaining become part of the discourse, after that the defenders of the castle deliberately crashed from above through explosives the roof of the tunnel, with the soldiers trapped inside [7th Chapter, pp. 136-137] (Kadare, 1974):

“They have collapsed the earth at the foundations,” said Ullug bey.

“They?” exclaimed the officer pointing above his head.

“Yes, they.”

“They must have detected us,” someone said.

“And we were so sure.”

“This means, we are buried alive in here!”

“Silence, I say!” The officer was impatient. “What can be done?” he asked the chief of the engineering troops.

“Nothing is any use,” replied Ullug bey.

“Can’t we manage to dig ourselves out of this rat hole?”

“No. at this very moment, they keep watch over our every movement. They are above us.”

“Perhaps the earth collapsed all by itself.” [a]

“No, it did not. I saw it myself.”

*“Then we are to die,” said the officer in a calm tone, addressing all of them. **“Allah has chosen this sort of death for us, and we have to accept it.” [b]***

Some of them went on their knees, praying. Most started groaning.

The astrologue squatted on the ground, his head between his hands. His mind was already on the other world.

“Why not surrender?” someone proposed weakly.

“Be quiet! You kaffir¹!” shrieked the officer.

“Who dares order people about here?” said Ullug

bey. “I am in command here.”

“I command my own janissaries² here,” replied the officer.

“Here, it is I who am in command,” repeated the chief engineer.

“Ullug bey, do you want us to surrender?”

“No, I don’t,” he answered. “I only wish others would not poke their noses into my affairs. I command here!”

“If we surrender it will be worse,” said the officer. “They will slaughter us like sheep.”

“Who knows,” whispered someone. [c]

“Silence,” said the officer. “They will bleed us to death in revenge for the massacres made by the akindjis³.”

The above passages describe the beginning of the incident. From now on, the writer focuses on the monologues, thoughts and visions of his fictional characters, mainly of the astrologue. We have to do with a short denial of the fact [a]: *“Perhaps the earth collapsed all by itself.”* As everything started suddenly, the situation might justify a rampant acceptance [b]: *“Allah has chosen this sort of death for us, and we have to accept it.”* A brief dialogue of bargaining, with a proposal to surrender, closes the episode [c]: *“If we surrender it will be worse,” said the officer. “They will slaughter us like sheep.” “Who knows,” whispered someone.*

Before entering into the monologues and gloomy thoughts of the astrologue, the writer obviously creates the *ad hoc* environment. The setting of a dark tunnel, with decreasing light, till the eternal darkness extends its power, is described [7th Chapter, pp. 136-137] (Kadare, 1974):

Groans and prayers came from all sides. And this lasted long. The short tongues of flame in the pails began to cast a pale light. Now and then they seem to pant for air, flickering in irregular white and red circles. Gradually, they were dying away. They were at their last breath and their waning light fell upon appalling faces, their features distorted by terror, on monstrous jaws and quivering eyes and noses. Everything was approaching a state of eternal darkness. The fires died out at last. Prayers, murmurs and vails resumed their former pitch after a short pause. Time and again a short shriek or gasp rose above the general chanting, but was soon stifled by sobs.

After manipulating with the environment, the writer soon will start its work with character’s thoughts. From now on, near-death experiences can easily be picked up, mainly in their negative form. Two eloquent passages will illustrate our assumption, the first one depicting a person climbing and climbing in vain the rungs in a ladder; and the second one in

² A term used for the elite infantry units of the Ottoman Turks.

³ A term used for light cavalymen, mainly volunteer irregulars, part of the Ottoman army.

¹ Kaffir = an Arabic term, synonym of infidel and heretic.

the form of a life review of the astrologue, the main fictional character of this unlucky history [7th Chapter, pp. 136-137] (Kadare, 1974):

He spoke flatly about some rungs in a ladder which he had climbed endlessly. The thought first struck me on the fourth rung. What if I get down? I thought. But I dismissed it. I kept on climbing. At the seventh rung a man slid by my side and fell dead. And still I climbed [...]

Then, I let the rungs go, and fell at the foot of the wall into the crowd. I thought no one had noticed me, but I was mistaken. They had followed every step of mine [...]

He went counting the rungs, but still he added reservations about all he was saying, for he wanted to be precise and frank in this last account of his life[...]

These visions will end up, as said, with a life review of the main character [last paragraph of the 7th Chapter] (Kadare, 1974):

The tired brain of the astrologue was making a last effort to pierce the black of the earth and come into the open, and send his last message to the world above. But the mud still kept him down. The dark and the earth had hastened to extend their empire over his soul too. The astrologue was weeping. Some friends, various women, noisy streets, certain doors and blows tried to introduce themselves, in a more or less logical sequence, but in vain.

By ending tragically the narration, the writer will change the scenes in the next chapter, but not without summarizing right from the start of the following 8th Chapter – this time through the voice of an anonymous castle defender – the assumptions, feelings and intuitions that the people above the ground had about the agony, the fate and the horrible end of the trapped soldiers, who were dying up slowly inside the tunnel. Depending on the particular situation of war hostilities, when survival and hatred for the enemy were the predominant drives, the meditations of the people above ground, albeit ambivalent, could not be sympathetic to the ill fate of the dead.

5. Discussion

NDE are probably one the last themes that are resisting to classical neurophysiology and neuroscience explanatory stratagems, and as such these phenomena might be crucial witnesses of the soul-body system, why not even of the emotional perceptiveness, telepathy and other surrogate notions (Rousseau, 2011a). It is a fact however, that the bulk of research on NDE comes out from philosophical or psychology sources. Nevertheless, even medical authors have been for a long time sceptical about the possibility to explain such phenomena merely based on the physiological changes that the brain might suffer during events leading to NDE, such as the cardiac arrest (Van Lommel, 2001).

Complex as they are, NDE have been approached through three main theoretical frames (French, 2005). Thus, spiritual theories with the assumption that consciousness detaches from the brain represent the first approach. Psychological theories, considering NDE a defensive mechanism, have been proposed as well. There is available as well a wide range of organic theories, namely those trying to explain these experiences in relation to homeostatic changes such as cerebral anoxia, hypercarbia, including the role of endorphins, NMDA receptors and neurotransmitters. Detailed descriptions on the neurobiological mechanisms of NDE, with the role of precise brain regions such as the midbrain, with *locus coeruleus*, the REM (rapid-eye movements) sleep it accounts for and the noradrenaline it synthesises, as well as certain areas of the temporal lobe, might enlighten the challenge to demystify this complex issue (Mobbs & Watt, 2011). Controversies are still characterizing the scientific discussions, with authors holding contradictory or opposite positions, let alone the fact that methodological approach is still to be defined (Greyson, 2012). And after all, reports are mostly anecdotal, thus objecting the opinions might be an easy work.

Near-death experiences have panoply of nuances and narratives. These experiences have been mainly picked up from survivors of cardiac arrest; but other settings have been studied as well, including all situations where losses of consciousness or restrictions in environmental perception have been present. Only a few reports of NDE in mine accident survivors are available (Maurice, 2013). In our case, we report a fictional narrative description of NDE, in a particular setting. People trapped inside an underground tunnel will die up slowly, and logically will have such unpleasant experiences, that can be partially explained with hypoxia and hypercarbia, but the role of perceptive deprivation, due to the profound darkness, cannot be underestimated. Very close to the realistic experiences, our characters' laments, feelings, despair, confusion, hallucinations will mix up with a deep somatic suffering. Such a combination of psychic and homeostatic disequilibrium is genuine, but experimentally untestable. This is probably the weakest point of all theories related to NDE: these are unrepeatably, thus irreproducible. That's as well a possible reason why our writer describes those only once in his novel, through a life review of the main fictional character, which he decided to bury alive.

References

- Agrillo, Ch. (2011). Near-death experience: out-of-body and out-of-brain? *Review of General Psychology*, 15(1), 1-10.
- Bonilla, E. (2011). Experiencias cercanas a la muerte. Revisión. *Invest Clin*, 52(1), 69-99.
- French, C. C. (2005). Near-death experiences in cardiac arrest survivors. *Prog Brain Res*, 150, 351-67.
- Genesis (1984). The Holy Bible: New International Version®. *Biblica*.
- Greyson, B., & Stevenson, I. (1980). The phenomenology of near death experiences. *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 137, 1193-1196.

- Greyson, B. (1983a). The near-death experience scale. Construction, reliability, and validity. *J Nerv Ment Dis*, 171(6), 369-75.
- Greyson, B. (1983b). The psychodynamics of near-death experiences. *J Nerv Ment Dis*, 171(6), 376-81.
- Greyson, B., Holden, J. M., & van Lommel, P. (2012). There is nothing paranormal about near-death experiences revisited: comment on Mobbs and Watt. *Trends Cogn Sci*, 16(9), 445; author reply 446.
- Heim, A. (1891). Notizen über den Tod durch Absturz. *Jahrbuch des schweizer. Alpenclub*, 27, 327-337.
- Homer. (1946). *The Odyssey* (W. H. D. Rouse, Trans.) New York, NY: Mentor.
- Jaye, C. (2004). Talking around embodiment: the views of GPs following participation in medical anthropology courses. *Med Humanit*, 30(1), 41-8.
- Kadare, I. (1974). *The castle*. Tirana: The '8 Nentori' Publishing House. Translated by Pavli Qesku, 130-137.
- Kadare, I. (1994). *Les tambours de la pluie*. Complete Works, 2nd Volume. Fayard. Translated by Jusuf Vrioni.
- Kadare, I. (2008). *The siege*. Edinburgh: Canongate Books Ltd. Translated by David Bellos.
- Kaplan and Sadock's Synopsis of Psychiatry. (2007). Behavioral Sciences/Clinical Psychiatry, 10th Edition, Lippincott and Williams, 61-69.
- Kübler-Ross, E. (1969). *On Death and Dying*. 1st Edition. New York: Macmillan, 260.
- Maurice, J. M. (2013). Chilean miners' experience and parallels to surviving the foster care system: healing, trauma, and recovery. *Can Fam Physician*, 59(6), 658-659.
- Mobbs, D., & Watt, C. (2011). There is nothing paranormal about near-death experiences: how neuroscience can explain seeing bright lights, meeting the dead, or being convinced you are one of them. *Trends Cogn Sci*, 15(10), 447-9.
- Moody, R. A. (1975). *Life after life*. Covington, GA: Mockingbird Books.
- Rousseau, D. (2011a). Near-death experiences and the mind-body relationship: a systems-theoretical perspective. *Journal of Near-Death Studies*, 29(3), 399-435.
- Rousseau, D. (2011b). Physicalism, Christianity and the near-death experience. An essay review of out-of-body and near-death experiences: brain-state phenomena or glimpses of immortality? *Journal of the Society for Psychological Research*, 75(4), 225-234.
- Schäfer, P. (2011). *The origin of Jewish Mysticism*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 27-28.
- Van der Sluijs, M. (2009). Three ancient reports of near-death experiences: Bremmer revisited. *Journal of Near-Death Studies*, 27(4), 223-253.
- Van Lommel, P., van Wees, R., Meyers, V., & Elfferich, I. (2001). Near-death experience in survivors of cardiac arrest: a prospective study in the Netherlands. *Lancet*, 358(9298), 2039-45.
- Van Tellingen, C. (2008). Heaven can wait – or down to earth in real time: Near-death experience revisited. *Neth Heart J*, 16(10), 359-62.